Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines: What Would Sun Tzu Say?

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IN THE GLOBAL War on Terrorism (GWOT), while Operation Enduring Freedom aims to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom—Philippines (OEF-P) continues with little fanfare. The operation began in response to the kidnappings of U.S. citizens by the Abu Sayyef Group (ASG), a radical Muslim organization backed by al-Qaeda.

From the U.S. perspective, the GWOT is a counterinsurgency operation on a global scale—a fight pitting those who believe in democracy and freedom against those who seek to enslave the world in an Islamic dictatorship. To successfully counter this threat, the United States and its allies must—

- Deny sanctuary to terrorists and insurgents.
- Eliminate their ability to move throughout their desired operational area (in this case, the world).
- Deny them direct or indirect support from sympathizers and nation-states.
- Wage psychological and civil affairs campaigns to separate the insurgency from the population using all the elements of national power: diplomatic, economic, informational, and military. The United States is executing this strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it is not being effective in Asia.

Before 11 September 2001, the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) was already interested in events in the Philippines. In August 2001, ASG kidnapped a U.S. citizen, Jeffrey Schilling. The U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC) deployed a Department of State-funded mobile training team to provide the Philippine government with a national counterterrorist capability.

A U.S. Special Forces (SF) unit trained and equipped a Philippine light reaction company (LRC) drawn from the ranks of the Philippine army's special forces and scout ranger organizations. From February to July 2001, while the LRC was being trained, the ASG kidnapped three more U.S. citizens. One key issue the LRC training identified was that, while the Philippines government could develop a tactically proficient counterterrorism force, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) did not have a command and control structure to properly employ the LRC or to integrate it with other forces and current operations.

Two days after completing training, the LRC deployed to the island of Basilan in the southern Philippine province of Mindanao in response to the ASG hostage crisis. However, the LRC deployed as a conventional unit, not as a national-level counter-ter-rorist force. Before the LRC deployed, American SF advisers had requested that they accompany the unit, but SOCPAC approved only a follow-on assessment mission and took no action until the tragedy of 11 September 2001.

In October 2001, the assessment mission developed a plan for the PACOM commander that called for the deployment of about 160 American SF advisers to Basilan to train, advise, and assist AFP units. In February 2002, under the guise of an exercise named Balikatan ("shoulder-to-shoulder"), the operation began. Elements of it continue to this day.

Mission and Intent

The mission on Basilan was to conduct unconventional warfare operations in the Southern Philippines through, by, and with the AFP to help the Philippine government separate the population from and to destroy terrorist organizations. The plan's intent was to provide all SF elements on Basilan with unifying guidance that would help harmonize counterterrorist and counterinsurgency operations in the Southern Philippines with initial focus on Basilan.

The key tasks Special Forces were to perform included—

- Denying the ASG sanctuary.
- Surveilling, controlling, and denying ASG routes.
- Surveilling supporting villages and key personnel.
- Conducting local training to overcome AFP weaknesses and sustain AFP strengths.

A Special Forces soldier conducts Security Assistance Training for members of the Philippine Armed Forces, Zamboanga Peninsula, Mindanao, 20 March 2003.

US Navy

- Supporting operations by the AFP "strike force" (LRC) in the area of responsibility (AOR).
- Conducting and supporting civil affairs operations in the AOR.

The end state desired was for the AFP to gain sufficient capability to locate and destroy the ASG to recover hostages and to enhance the legitimacy of the Philippine government. Much of the operation was a success; the ASG was driven from Basilan, and one U.S. hostage was recovered although her husband was killed. Nonetheless, Army leaders should examine the strategic issues of OEF-P to better fight the GWOT in Asia and worldwide.

In his classic book on strategy, *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote, "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."[1] Understanding this principle is essential. Before a commander embarks on an operation, he must thoroughly examine the situation and assess his and the enemy's relative strengths and weaknesses at both the strategic and tactical levels.

In OEF-P, American leaders failed to know themselves. Theater-level and national-level U.S. military leaders did not understand, to a certain extent, the SF concepts of employment and capabilities in a combat advisory mission during unconventional warfare. The combatant commander and the Secretary of Defense imposed restrictions on SF soldiers' ability to efficiently conduct operations to accomplish the mission. Specifically, because of force-protection considerations, American SF advisers were restricted to operating at battalion level with their AFP counterparts and were not allowed to operate at lower tactical echelons required to be effective in combat situations, which was a strategic error.

U.S. leaders at the highest levels did not understand this unconventional war. The belief that U.S. soldiers would be safe at a battalion headquarters implied the existence of front lines and a rear area, which is a fundamental misunderstanding of counterinsurgency and counterterrorist conditions. To see this clearly, consider that the only U.S. combat casualty in OEF-P occurred just outside an AFP division headquarters when a terrorist bomb killed a U.S. soldier.

Six months later, the combatant commander and the Secretary of Defense permitted Special Forces to operate at the company level. Even this less stringent restriction still prevented SF advisers' from providing effective assistance, however. The Philippine Scout Ranger battalion commander repeatedly requested that his American SF operational detachment be allowed to deploy with his companies and patrols because he knew he was on the trail of the ASG and the hostages, but permission was denied. Tragically, when Philippine scout rangers engaged the ASG, American hostage Gracia Burnham's husband was killed by friendly fire.

The failure to know ourselves and understand the nature of the unconventional conflict led to over-reliance on technical reconnaissance assets. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and the Navy's P3 Orion were used to locate the ASG and the hostages on Basilan. The rationale for technical reconnaissance assets was, again, force protection and to minimize risks to U.S. personnel. The use of these platforms did reduce patrolling in remote areas, but the UAV surveillance was extremely conventional, surveilling specific named areas of interest supporting the joint task force's (JTF's) priority intelligence requirements.

The forces on the ground could not exploit the reconnaissance assets because the JTF tightly controlled them. Gracia Burnham's memoir describes the ineffectiveness of this technique: "[We] heard a spy plane circling overhead, [but our captors] ignored them . . . because they had been circling for months and nothing ever happened."[2] This illustrates one of the weaknesses in the American way of war—an over-reliance on technological solutions at the expense of the human element, which must be the main effort in unconventional warfare.

The United States and the Philippines did not understand the nature of the enemy. Connections between the ASG and al-Qaeda were well known because Osama bin-Laden's brother-in-law had provided the ASG's original funding.[3] U.S. military leaders also did not understand the relationship between the ASG and other terrorist organizations such as the Jemmah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia or the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines.

Because the Philippine government was negotiating a peace agreement with the MILF, U.S. leaders prohibited SF units from assisting the AFP in MILF-controlled areas. Because the AFP wanted to work closely with the U.S. military, it shifted AFP troops from MILF-controlled areas so more AFP troops could benefit from U.S. advice and assistance elsewhere. These actions by U.S. and Philippine leaders created de facto ASG sanctuaries. The ASG and MILF had a mutually supporting relationship and a loose alliance. Many families in the area had members who belonged to both organizations.

The ASG has links in funding, support, and ideology to the JI, which aims to create pan-Islamic states in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Southern Philippines.[4] Membership in JI, ASG, and MILF extends over vast distances in these island nations, but U.S. operations were limited primarily to Basilan and local waters, allowing the JI, ASG, and MILF terrorist organizations to move with relative ease throughout all three countries and hundreds of their territorial islands. Had the United States and the Philippines reached a different strategic-level decision based on a thorough analysis and understanding of the enemy, U.S. Special Forces and the AFP's LRC might have been able to execute a broad, combined campaign covering the entire AOR.

Sun Tzu did not say so explicitly, but he implied that it is just as important to know one's ally as it is to know one's enemy and oneself. Regrettably, U.S. strategic leaders made several wrong decisions regarding the operation in the Philippines because they did not understand their ally's beliefs as expressed in the Philippine Constitution.[5] The deployment of U.S. troops was contentious in-country because the local press asserted that U.S. forces could not legally participate in combat operations.[6] However, a correct reading of the Philippine Constitution reveals that it prohibits only the stationing of foreign forces in the Philippines after the 1991 expiration of the Philippines–U.S. agreement on military bases.[7] The constitution does not prohibit combat operations and provides an exception to this—if there is a treaty in force—and a treaty has been in force between the two countries since 1951.[8] A lack of understanding of Philippine laws contributed to U.S. decisions to unduly restrict the employment of SF advisers.

Strategy and Alliances

If they had better understood the enemy, themselves, and their ally, U.S. military leaders could have undertaken more comprehensive operations and employed Sun Tzu's two essential strategic concepts: attacking the enemy's strategy and disrupting his alliances. The combined U.S. and AFP military force did attack the enemy's strategy, using a robust civil affairs program to undercut the terrorists by strengthening Philippine government institutions and local security to enable Filipinos to go about their daily lives without the constant fear of terrorism. Civic action projects included building water supply and distribution systems; rebuilding mosques and schools; and providing medical, dental, and veterinary programs.

To help reinforce the democratic process, U.S. and AFP personnel participated in many civic events, such as school graduation ceremonies and village and provincial meetings. In some remote areas, no graduation ceremonies had taken place in over 5 years because of security concerns. Because SF-trained AFP security forces deterred terrorist attacks and disrupted terrorists' ability to operate in and around the cities, the Philippines held its first city festival celebrations with nighttime events. A U.S. Navy and Marine Engineer Task Force improved the road network, which, in turn, improved communications

Marines unload a Cobra, to support Balikatan Exercise 2004 conducted with the Philippine Armed Forces.

US Marine Corps

between villages and helped farmers move their products to market. The civic action program was one of the most successful aspects of the mission and reflected great credit on the governments of the Philippines and the United States.

The decision to not directly attack the alliance of the three terrorist groups and to concentrate solely on the ASG was a strategic error, however. Sustained operations on Basilan eventually drove the ASG off the island because of combat losses and the loss of bases and popular support, but the ASG "lived to fight another day" with help from the JI and MILF. The ASG is now reorganizing on the southern islands of Jolo and Tawi Tawi, where U.S. forces have not been allowed to help the AFP.

Sun Tzu's Assessment

Sun Tzu would tell us that OEF-P is not yet complete. Significant strategic errors limited the operation's effectiveness, but some successes should be heralded. The ASG no longer operates on Basilan. Civic action programs continue to support the population. Philippine social welfare agencies and nongovernmental organizations are attacking the underlying socioeconomic conditions that give rise to terrorism. U.S. advisers did take an indirect approach to attaining U.S. strategic objectives. This approach, at least, would please Sun Tzu.

Unlike in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. unilateral operations are not feasible within an allied nation. However, the commitment of Special Forces to advise and assist an ally in attaining mutual objectives is an effective, indirect use of the military instrument. Had U.S. forces more thoroughly followed Sun Tzu's strategic concepts, the United States might have achieved greater success in ridding Southeast Asia of the scourge of terrorism. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 84.
2. Gracia Burnham, with Dean Merrill, *In the Presence of My Enemies* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndlae House Publishers, 2003), 237.
3. Roman Kupchinsky, "Bankrolling Terror: A Special RFE/RL Report on Terrorist Financing," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, on-line at <www.rferl.org/corruption watch/2002/11/40-211102.asp>, accessed 16 April 2004.
4. Ibid.
5. For information about the Philippine Constitution, see on-line at <www.chanrobles.com/philsupremelaw1.htm>, accessed 16 April 2004.
6. James S. Robbins, "Freedom Eagle: The Mission in the Philippines," *National Review,* 18 January 2002, on-line at <www.nationalreview.com/contributors/robbins011802.shtml>, accessed 16 April 2004.
7. The Philippine Constitution of 1987 states, "After the expiration in 1991 of the Agreement between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America concerning military bases, foreign military bases, troops, or facilities shall not be allowed in the Philippines except under a treaty duly concurred in by the Senate and, when the Congress so requires, ratified by a majority of the votes cast by the people in a national referendum held for that purpose, and recognized as a treaty by the other contracting State." See on-line at <www.chanrobles.com/philsupremelaw1.htm>, accessed 16 April 2004.
8. Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines, 30 August 1951. See on-line at <www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/philipines/phil001.htm>, accessed 16 April 2004.

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